

The 10 Best Legal Sites on the Web

A personal list of the most useful sites for lawyers

Robert J. Ambrogi

Law Technology News

July 23, 2001

My fascination with the Internet began in 1993, when, as a sole practitioner, my search for affordable legal research drew me online. When I discovered how much was available, all free, I wanted to alert other lawyers. Articles grew into a column, which evolved into the "legal.online" newsletter -- complete with a five-star rating system and its annual "Best of the Web for Lawyers" awards.

Now, I've written a book, "The Essential Guide to the Best (and Worst) Legal Sites on the Web," published by ALM Publishing. It reviews and rates hundreds of sites in some two dozen practice areas. The goal remains to pinpoint the sites most useful to legal professionals.

With the book's publication this month, it seems an appropriate occasion to offer my personal list of the 10 Best Web Sites for Lawyers. As I do in the book, I pick from the perspective of a site's overall usefulness. The best measure of this, in my view, is content. I also consider design, ease of use and originality.

In no particular order, here are my top 10:

FindLaw

www.findlaw.com <<http://www.findlaw.com>>

Started in 1994, FindLaw has evolved into a multifaceted portal, boasting the highest traffic of any legal site. Its core remains its comprehensive index of links to resources in more than 30 practice areas. But beyond its index are a host of features, including an ever-growing library of free court opinions and statutory codes. When West Group purchased FindLaw last January, it promised to build on this popular formula. The core features will remain, West says, and will continue to be free. Plus, West planned to expand FindLaw's legal news and career centers, create on-demand CLE and incorporate its West Legal Directory.

lexisONE

www.lexisone.com <<http://www.lexisone.com>>

From Lexis Nexis comes this impressive free service, aimed at solos and small firms. Launched in July 2000, it features Supreme Court cases since 1790 and selected federal and state cases from 1996, some 6,000 legal forms, the Martindale-Hubbell Law Digest, and a broad collection of links to legal resources. Other sections focus on practice management, professional development, marketing and lifestyle. New reports cover court decisions and the legal

industry, while The Loop is home to discussion boards devoted to legal topics.

law.com

www.law.com <<http://www.law.com>>

I am anything but objective here. American Lawyer Media Inc. -- my employer -- is closely aligned with law.com and shares common ownership. That said, it is beyond debate that law.com has become a premier legal destination. It is the primary place online to find legal news and features from ALM's national and regional magazines and newspapers. Beyond that, it offers nationwide job listings, seminars, practice centers, and, more recently, an online suite of practice-management software.

Legal Information Institute

www.law.cornell.edu <<http://www.law.cornell.edu>>

Cornell Law School's Legal Information Institute established the first law site on the Internet in 1992 and the first legal Web site in 1993. It became the leading Internet site for distribution of Supreme Court opinions and later added the New York Court of Appeals. Its hypertext U.S. Code remains its most heavily used feature, but it has published a host of significant legal documents. As a lawyer once put it to me, "They deserve a lifetime achievement award."

Google.com

www.google.com <<http://www.google.com>>

Beyond its sheer breadth, the Google search engine stands out thanks to its unique PageRank technology. Simply put, Google interprets a link to a Web page as a vote for its quality. The more sites that link to a page, the more valuable it must be and the higher its ranking. Adding to its value was its recent acquisition of Deja.com's archive of messages posted since 1995 to Usenet -- the Internet's original bulletin board.

FirstGov

www.firstgov.gov <<http://www.firstgov.gov>>

The federal government's vast online network harbors many treasures, but finding your way can be daunting. FirstGov is the official portal to U.S. government information on the Internet, offering access to some 20,000 sites. Organized primarily by topic, rather than agency, it enables users to browse for federal resources related to Arts and Culture, for example, or Consumer Services and Safety.

Thomas

<http://thomas.loc.gov>

When Newt Gingrich became speaker of the House in 1994, he vowed to use the Internet to open the legislative process to the public. On Jan. 5, 1995, Gingrich and the Library of Congress unveiled the legislative information site, "Thomas." Today, Thomas includes the full text of bills, public laws and legislation; the complete Congressional Record since 1989; committee information; roll-call votes since 1989; and a library of historical documents.

Securities and Exchange Commission

www.sec.gov <http://www.sec.gov>

In 1994, the nonprofit Internet Multicasting Service began offering the SEC's EDGAR database of corporate filings free via the Internet. A year later, as its funding was about to expire, IMS urged the SEC to continue where it would leave off. At first, the SEC hedged, but then decided to continue free Internet access to EDGAR. Today, the SEC's site stands out as an important destination not simply for securities lawyers, but for any lawyer representing, researching or litigating against a corporation.

ABAnet

www.abanet.org <http://www.abanet.org>

Consider the numbers: The American Bar Association's site is the online home of an organization comprised of more than 2,200 entities (24 sections, five divisions, 80-plus commissions, forums and task forces, and more than 1,700 subcommittees), which together publish 70 periodicals and more than 1,200 titles. Virtually all of these entities and resources are organized under and accessible through this site, creating an enormous virtual warehouse of resources dedicated to law and law practice.

Federal Judiciary Homepage

www.uscourts.gov <http://www.uscourts.gov>

In 1995, I surveyed the availability of free court opinions on the Internet. I found only a handful of courts' opinions published by an even smaller number of trailblazing sites. Today, the judiciary's home page stands as a symbol of how dramatically the Web has changed the legal landscape. Its links page illustrates how extensively available court information now is on the Web, with each court's site likely to include opinions, local rules and sometimes even its docket.